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C O N F I D E N T I A L YEREVAN 000161

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM AM

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT APPOINTS MAYORAL CANDIDATE TO BE YEREVAN  
MAYOR TWO MONTHS BEFORE ELECTION

Classified By: DCM Joseph Pennington, reason 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (U) The government publicized on March 4 that President Sargsian had appointed Gagik Beglarian, the announced Republican Party mayoral candidate, to be Yerevan mayor effective immediately. Beglarian replaces longtime Yerevan Mayor Yervand Zakharian. The municipal election will be held May 31, 2009.

¶2. (U) This year marks the first time that Armenia's capital will have an elected mayor; previously the Yerevan mayor has always been appointed by the president, and had powers equivalent to a regional governor (all of whom are presidentially appointed). The GOAM revised the law to create an elected city council and mayor for Yerevan -- home of roughly 40% of Armenians -- to accomodate its European democracy commitments. However, the GOAM decided to create an indirect method of election. There will be a party-list/proportional representation election to allocate the new citywide municipal council. The candidate at the top of the party list of the party which wins a dominant plurality (of at least 40%) will automatically become mayor. If no party surpasses the 40% threshold, parties elected to the council must negotiate and select a mayor from among their number.

¶3. (C) COMMENT: Appointing the ruling party candidate to the mayorship just three months before he is to stand for election to that position -- and in the absence of any clear reason, such as an unexpected vacancy -- is a troubling indicator for what we already expected would be a particularly problematic election. We share the consensus view around town that the only reason to do this is to put Beglarian (more commonly known as "Chorny (Black) Gago" for his thuggish reputation) in direct control of the levers of administrative power to ensure that the election is well and thoroughly rigged. The theory is that the previous incumbent, Zakharian, is unhappy to be displaced, and thus may not put all his heart and energy into the kind of hardball arm-twisting and ballot-box stuffing that will likely be required to elect Beglarian.

¶4. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: Yerevan is a bastion of pro-opposition feeling, and "Chorny Gago" is an infamous figure in the city, known for his tight control and flagrant manipulation of the central Yerevan "Kentron" district he has headed since 2002. He is the very picture of an old-style, corrupt party machine boss. The authorities would find it extremely embarrassing if the opposition were to win the capital city election -- which could make the victor the most legitimate political figure in the country, if cleanly elected -- so are determined to pull out every trick to prevent that from happening. With no international election monitors to keep an eye on proceedings, we expect this election could be on par with the worst elections in Armenia's checkered political history. END COMMENT

¶5. (U) BIO INFORMATION:

Gagik Beglarian

-- Born 1964 in Yerevan

-- Graduated in 1985 from the Yerevan Institute of National Economy as an economist

-- Served in the army 1985-87

-- 1993 elected to the Supreme Assembly of the Republic of Armenia

-- Elected chief executive of the "Kentron" (Central) district of Yerevan in 2002.

-- Joined the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) in 2006.

-- Joined the RPA's governing Board in 2006

-- Married with two children

YOVANOVITCH